

Sketching a Genesis of Zerowork

A First Step in the Deposit of Some of its Archive in May Day Rooms,

Marx Memorial Library
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Iain Boal and Michaela Brennan prompted the following sketch. Iain asked me to deposit my *Zerowork* papers with a new archive in London called May Day Rooms, and to accompany them with some “mapping” or contextualization of both the genesis and demise of the *Zerowork* project. Michaela’s prompt was direct: what did these records have to do with the future? Her question arose a year after the clearances of the 2011 municipal encampments under the name of Occupy Wall Street, and it provoked the further question, what is the force that can bring an end to patriarchy, to capitalism, and its wars, its prisons, its thefts, its racism, its oppression, its exploitation, and its overall miserabilism?

As I looked over my records to answer Iain’s request for a “mapping” it became clear that my archive was larger than I had thought, and that there was no way that I could summarize them neatly. On the other hand, the answer to Michaela’s question came easily, surprisingly so, for the obvious questions then are the obvious questions now.

WHAT IS THE WORKING-CLASS?
WHO IS IT? WHERE IS IT?
WHAT HAS IT DONE?
WHAT CAN IT DO? WHAT *MUST* IT DO?

This sketch can supplement the very full bibliography and account that is found in the *Zerowork* webpage (www.zerowork.org) which is under construction by Harry Cleaver, or that is provided in the extensive conversation with George Caffentzis (www.wildcat-www.de/en/material/tptg_caf). One of my purposes is to assert additional streams of thinking to their accounts which emphasize Italian autonomist Marxism and the perspective of wages for housework respectively. Speaking for myself, the *Zerowork* project was part and parcel of two or three other projects, the American prisoners movement, in New England particularly, and the movement for English ‘history from below’, particularly the social history of crime.

Harry Cleaver, George Caffentzis, and I shared an important experience though we did not know it at the time, namely the study of Karl Marx’s *Capital*. Caffentzis did this as part of his massive critique of bourgeois economics in the *Anti-Samuelson* text. Cleaver did so in a remarkable and influential interpretation called *Reading Capital Politically*. Linebaugh did so with an unusual group of international militants in London.

“The working-class is revolutionary or it is nothing.”

“The emancipation of the working class is the task of the working-class itself.”

The “mapping” of *Zerowork* must begin with a chronology. In 1963 JFK was shot and Malcolm X scandalized the establishment by commenting that “the chickens had come home to roost.” What did he mean?

That year four prophetic books were published, namely, James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, E.P. Thompson, *The Making of English Working Class*, and Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. They seemed to announce a conjoining of the transition of civil rights to black power, the violence inherent in Third World resistance to imperialism, the historical power of the working class at the birth of capitalism in England, and the widespread unhappiness of housewives in Cold War America.

These four books should not be classified as ‘history from below’ precisely because they express the aspirations of historical actors seeking to escape the subordination inherent in ‘below’. What they did was announce new historical actors demanding, if not the status of ‘above’, then at least being on a level. They will shape the destiny of the next two decades. Together they seemed to prefigure a world force that was anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, anti-war.

Was this force part of the human story? History alone could tell.

Meanwhile, two historians, both Marxists in their way, provided me with guidance.

In 1968 in New York I met E.P. Thompson, the English peacenik who preserved his belief in revolutionary Marxism despite breaking with Communist Parties in 1956. I also met Eugene Genovese in New York who came to be my room-mate while undergoing psychoanalysis in New York. Publically he was nationally notorious, not for his scholarly study of the slave south which was technical and boring, but for declaring himself a “Marxist” and hoping for victory of the NLF.

Between 1969 and 1972 I resided in England in order to be part of the Warwick ‘crime group,’ an international collection of scholars Thompson had gathered. I was inspired by *The Making of the English Working Class* which had suggested that the class war was fought in terms of Tyburn, or capital punishment. His history brought “criminals” and “workers” together at least for the 18th century. (Malcolm X and George Jackson had done it for the 20th.)

The period was bounded by the Attica revolt and “holocaust” (as the prisoners called it) of September 1971 and the victory of the NLF in Vietnam in 1975. It was an intense period of crisis to the American empire.

At the same time I lived in London and with John Merrington, an English social historian and student of Christopher Hill. Merrington had helped introduce Antonio Gramsci to English readers. Together we formed a *Capital* reading group which met for a year and a half every Sunday afternoon. This was a seminal grouping. London was a planetary cross-roads – Greece, Turin, Ghana, Trinidad, Algeria – as well as a

manufacturing site in the global division of labor of automobilism. Our group reflected the diversity of the time and place. Merrington had begun the translation project of 'Italian materials,' as we called various writings from Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua. Clement Maharaj, drummer from Berlin, comrade of Trinidad, close associate of the aging C.L.R. James. When were we going to provide an answer to Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, he wanted to know? One of our occasional members was Selma James who was testing the ideas of Mariarosa Dalla Costa by treating Geoff Kaye, the political economist, as a whetstone to sharpen her own forensic wit. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Falling Wall Press, 1972) was in gestation. Stefan Feuchtwanger, the anthropologist, Fei-ling Blackburn, student of international Chinese banditry and associate of the *New Left Review*, Bethia Waterman, American feminist, CR member (consciousness raiser) and participant of the Ruskin College Women's Liberation conference of 1970 were other members. In retrospect we can see future political differences in the hair-line fissures of this group yet at the time it seemed merely extraordinary, a crucible.

Having spun out various threads – the revisionist Marxism of English social history and its quarrels with the *New Left Review*, the African American internationalism of CLR James and George Rawick in association with the rank-and-file struggles of black workers in the Detroit auto plants, a taste of the Italian autonomist Marxism as mediated by the translations of Merrington and Ed Emery, and the feminism of the Wages for Housework campaign – I returned to the rough and tumble of America hoping these threads could form one of the cables to haul down the scholarly idols of the princes and potentates of the American empire.

Between 1972 and 1974 I taught at Franconia College, New Hampshire. In November 1972 I published a small pamphlet re-printing James Boggs chapter from *The American Revolution*, originally published in 1963 and 'Guido Baldi', "Theses on the Mass Worker," which had originally been published in *Radical America*, a journal of the early SDS. Its point was to compare the bold spirit of generalization about the American class struggle to the actual experience of Detroit autoworkers in the post-war era in which the trade-offs between the machine-induced speed-up of production and the length of the working-day was organized by the bosses to augment surplus-value. By putting a biographic account of an American worker next to a daring enunciation of historical theses I hoped to prepare the ground for practical class analysis.

In 1973 'Guido Baldi' (the pseudonym of two Italians living in America) met in February and we began to consider publishing an "Italian book" consisting of translations of principle texts from the Italian movement of P.O. and Lotta Continua. I remember this meeting less for its title, "The Bolshevik Bandit Conference," than for Mario Montano's suggestion to Gene Mason, a political science professor who had recently been released from Kentucky state prison, "let's not talk about consciousness but struggle."

Two months later I wrote and published *The New Hampshire State Prison Lock-up and Shake-down* describing the vicious struggle in a prison where I had begun teaching. Here Viet vets demanded to know my opinion of Stalin's philosophy of dialectics! Not

only did prisoners get right to the point, many had taken lessons from Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Cong.

In April 15 we formed the New English Prisoners' Association (NEPA) from a group of prisoners, ex-cons, and their supporters. A month earlier under the leadership of a prisoner organization called the NPRA, or National Prisoner Rights Association, the doors of the maximum security prison of Massachusetts, Walpole, were open to "citizen observers."¹

At this NEPA conference I gave the first public version of my work on "Karl Marx and the Theft of Wood," in order to show that Marx was on *our* side, not that we were on *his*, as many sectarians seemed to want. This setting was important to me because I wanted my scholarly work to contribute to the praxis of the movement. With Gene Mason and Monty Neill I became an editor of *NEPA NEWS: THE VOICE OF THE NEW ENGLAND PRISONERS ASSOCIATION*. We published monthly a twenty page newspaper for two years.

That same month a conference in Rutgers, New Jersey, of the Anglo-American Labor History Society met including Thompson and Genovese. Many radicals only addressed each other. The Union of Radical Political Economy, the Critical legal Studies movement, the Radical History Society, and numerous other alternative academic societies were created as part of the crisis of the bourgeois academic disciplines. Labor history, women's history, African-American history obtained some power within the universities which at the same time were opening up to first-generation college students, women, and people of color. But the historians were not closing the chasms with 'the class.' However, to address a study of Marx in the Moselle Valley in the 19th century to a group of American radicals and ex-cons in the 20th century seemed Quixotic. Yet it worked! I began teaching prisoners in earnest, in Marion, in Walpole, in Thomaston, in Concord, because the students were *interested*.

In 1974 the *Zerowork* project was formed. The hope, as I felt it, was to present an analysis of north American working-class activity which drew on the methodological and theoretical insights of British social history and Italian Marxism. We discarded New Age remedies and workerist solutions alike, Third Worldism seemed to neglect the struggle in the heartland. We derided the Maoists, the Stalinists, and the Trotskyists as epigones. Some of these led to the dangerous, reckless path of the armed struggle, as practiced by the Weather Underground. Any mapping of *Zerowork* would include Rawick, Glaberman, C.L.R. James because their work, going into the 1940s, emphasized the self-activity of the class.

Lavoro Zero was the title of an Italian journal. Yet there were other sources of the idea. For instance, Paul Lafargue's *Right to be Lazy* (1883). Lafargue quoted an *Essay on Trade and Commerce* (1770) which proposed to imprison the poor in ideal "work-

¹ Jamie Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole: A True Story in the movement for Prison Abolition* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2008). "The experiences from March to May of 1973 revealed two surprising things: prisoners could safely determine their own reality, and a prison with no guards that was run democratically by prisoners functioned smoothly and was profoundly productive."

houses”, which should become “houses of terror, where they should work fourteen hours a day in such fashion that when meal time was deducted there should remain twelve hours of work full and complete”. For Lafargue “laziness” meant a shorter working-day. For the author of the *Essay on Trade and Commerce* it meant at least twelve hours a day. This was one meaning of “zerowork”, a shorter working-day. We advocated “more time” to use the title to Linton Kwesi Johnson’s exuberant song.

The cover of the first issue was bright orange with a handsome, modernist design by Manfredo Massironi.

We had a beautiful poster with ZEROWORK emblazoned in diagonal across thirty-two rare or famous photographs and cartoons from the American worker’s movement. It was sent to us by one of our corresponding editors, Ferruccio Gambino.

The collective for *Zerowork 1* which appeared in January 1976 consisted of George Caffentzis, Paolo Carpinano, William Cleaver, Peter Linebaugh, Mario Montano, Bruno Ramirez, Leoncio Schaedel, and Peter Taylor. Ferruccio Gambino and John Merrington were corresponding editors in Italy and Britain. The editorial collective of *Zerowork 2* which appeared in the fall of 1977 consisted of Paolo Carpinano, Harry Cleaver, Peter Linebaugh, Phil Mattera, Bruno Ramirez, John Merrington, Christian Marazzi, and Bruno Cartosio. There were significant differences. Three left the first collective, and four joined the second.

One of the main ideas was that of the political composition of the working class, and the notion of “recomposition.” Another was the notion of a cycle of struggle. A third concerned the dynamics between the classes, which could be technological, social, political, or punitive. We had our way of talking too: instead of saying “the working class” we’d just say “the Class,” instead of “capitalism” we’d say “Capital.”

The previous year in the summer of 1976 at small international gathering in Soho, London, Selma James, in response to a call for help for the political prisoners in Germany spoke bluntly, “we are tired of cleaning up your messes.” This was a decisive intervention of gender politics for she referred to the men in prison and the women who had to defend and support them. Thus was the autonomy of the women’s movement from “male revolutionaries” was asserted.

That summer I moved to the University of Rochester to work in a history department led by Eugene Genovese who had just published *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. He expected relations of clientage rather than collegueality. When he asked me to help with the managing of his new journal, *Marxist Perspectives*, I had to decline owing to the prior commitment to *Zerowork*.

1975 saw a convergence between his idea of “paternalism” in the relation between masters and slaves in the American south, and E.P. Thompson’s work on the 18th century and the paternalism between the gentry and “the poor.” Thompson, too, was changing from the positions of 1963. By the 1970s he was no longer employing terms with revolutionary connotation. “The labouring poor” replaced “the proletariat.” He wrote in 1974, “a plebs, perhaps, is not a working class.” True, the plebs were

loose and disorderly, a mob. Yet they lacked “affirmative” rebellion, Thompson would say. There was an “absence of alternative social horizons.” And most seriously their weakest link was the absence of spiritual or psychic authority. I shall explore this point in terms of Baptism and Methodism within the Afro-American struggle. But that will be years later. Both these sometime Communist revisionists, Thompson and Genovese, were no longer thinking of the working-class as revolutionary, partly because their notion of “working-class” did not include, odd as it may seem, the African American, the people of the Third World, or the rising of the women.

Thompson published “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski” in 1973, and named varieties of Marxism: as Heritage, as Tradition, as Doctrine, as Method. But not as Liberation, not as Revolution. Were not people in Ireland, in Palestine, in Chile, in Vietnam, in the factories and universities and kitchens and prisons and bedrooms wondering, dreaming, fighting, against capitalism?

Michel Foucault published *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* in 1975. Two years later it was translated and published in English as *Discipline and Punish*. The emphasis was nearly totally one-sided, without the history of incarceration, legal victories, or the powerful imagination stirring practice of escape.

In 1975 I toured Europe, screening the film “3,000 Years and Life” by Randall Conrad, a documentary of Walpole M.C.I. in Massachusetts. I also presented my contribution to working-class knowledge in two volumes, “Tyburn: A Study of the Labouring Poor” in which I began to provide the evidence for erasing the sociological split, and the evolutionary stages, between “criminals” and “workers.” In 1975 *Albion’s Fatal Tree* and *Whigs and Hunters*, two results of our Warwick ‘crime group’ collective were published.

In September the service workers at the University of Rochester went on strike with their union I 199. *Zerowork I* was published with the date of December 1975 though we actually didn’t receive it from the printers until January 1976. The year tied together some of the important strands I had been working with, namely, 1) the historiography of English marxists, 2) the critique of political economy as part the revolutionary analysis of capital, 3) and the self-activity of the American prisoner movement.

I have always been somewhat mystified by the “split” of the *Zerowork* collective in March 1977. It stirred up emotions of betrayal and abandonment which, doubtless, had other causes but whose power was such that the reasoning, the politics, of the split went above my head. My own role had been that of a convenor in 1973. In theoretical leadership I was willing to listen to others. Although I managed the printing and much of the secretarial work of editing, my own role otherwise was modest. I wanted to write as an American, not English, not Italian. I wrote from the hinterland – the White Mountains of New Hampshire or the ‘burned-out district’ of western New York, and if my own written contributions were hidden or modest that was fine with me. Nevertheless I whole heartedly delved into the struggles of autoworkers and coal miners especially, employing the methods of my comrades and the techniques of research I had learned in England.

My individual position was fraught with incompatibilities: between the confidence of the teacher and the diffidence of the student, between the university and the prison, between America and Europe, between scholarship and activism, between settled, old-fashioned Marxism and an independent, autonomous understanding, between parenting and teaching. Eventually they would lead to breaks: divorce, “unemployment,” insecurity.

There is a concept that applies to all four projects. That is “the wage.” It is the form of the central class relation as described in *Capital*, that is, the buying and selling of labor power. It applies to the scholarly work of February 1975 that eventually became the *London Hanged*. It applies to wages-for-housework. It applies to the whole prisoner movement. The Attica revolt of 1971 began as a wage demand. There was Nixon’s “wage freeze,” or national policy. There was the “social wage.” There was “wage inflation.”

The criminalization of custom and the monetization of labor relations were not just two sides of the same coin. They became a binary which lay deep in the structures of capitalism for centuries, the sturdy rogue on one hand, the industrious apprentice on the other, between the respectable and the “rough” parts of the class, the polytechnics of Robinson Crusoe versus the step and fetch it of man Friday. The prison and the factory possessed a unity which the rulers’ thinking usually kept apart though there were exceptions such as (“the house of terror” of the late 18th century, or Bentham’s panopticon). Karl Marx regarded the “irrationality” of the wage as his original contribution to human knowledge (along with the distinction between concrete and abstract labor and the three forms of surplus-value - profit, rent, and interest).

The wages-for-housework movement (including the campaign, the furious debates) raised this loud and clear. The “wage” was central to those who were thinking about the Black Power movement whose history lay in slavery with its misleading opposite of “free wage labor.” The irrationality of the wage-form (it conceals surplus-value) became the basis of working-class politics, or the conflict and negotiations within the hierarchies of power, status, skill, consumer-spending, race, and gender within the working class as a whole. If we look at society as a whole at that time, racism and patriarchy could therefore be seen as essential to wage relations, i.e. as sources of huge amounts of unpaid labor. But was it not reductive to put it this way? Perhaps. I supported the 1199 union of university service workers for higher wages, yet my own wage relation to the university ended when Genovese and the university lowered the axe. The chickens had come home to roost for me too.

Looking back it is clear that we missed a lot. Nuclear energy. Heteronormativity. The border. Many continents. The environment. The commons. Yet we also clearly saw that the working-class is always in motion, that the spirit of revolution also moves.